Prepared & Engaged Youth Serving American Communities

National 4-H Impact Assessment Project

Acknowledgments

There are many people who contributed to the completion and preparation of this report. These include the Impact Project Steering Group and the Report Work Group
Dr. Bill Peterson, Project Director;
Dr. Gary Gerhard and
Ms. Karen Hunter, Kansas State University;
Dr. Laura Marek, University of Connecticut;
Ms. Christie Phillips, National 4-H Council; and
Dr. Allison Titcomb, University of Arizona Institute for Children, Youth and Families.

In addition, Mr. Jerold Adams from University of Idaho, Ms. Lisa Lauxman, Dr. Shirley Jo Taylor, and Ms. Cynthia Flynn from University of Arizona, and Dr. Alan Smith of USDA-CSREES provided useful suggestions on early drafts of the report.

In addition, we want to thank CSREES Families/4-H/Nutrition unit and the University of Tennessee for help with the printing of the report.

We heartily acknowledge the help of all of these individuals and organizations for without their generous contributions we would not have completed this national survey.

We gratefully express appreciation to all those who have been involved in this first ever national assessment of the 4-H Youth Development Program. They include: National 4-H staff under the leadership of Dr. Alma Hobbs, State 4-H program leaders, Cooperative Extension faculty and staff, Evaluation and Accountability personnel, particularly Dr.John Carlson and staff with the University of Idaho Social Science Research Unit, pilot test sites, national survey sites, volunteers and especially those 4-H youth participants and adult volunteers who contributed to the results.

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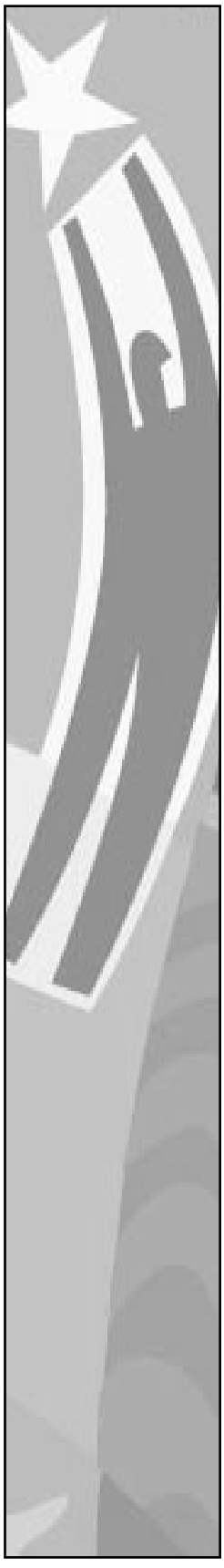


Executive Summary

In order to gather data on the perceptions about the benefits of the 4-H Youth Development Program, youth and adults associated with 4-H were surveyed in 1999-2000. Questionnaires were divided into components related to critical elements of youth development. The survey sections included the following: Adults in 4-H, Feelings about 4-H, Learning about 4-H, Helping Others, Planning and Decision Making in 4-H and Belonging in 4-H. Feedback from a total of 2,467 youth and 471 adult respondents nationwide reveal that young people and adults believe that 4-H Youth Development programs reflect very positively the critical elements that researchers identify as essential to positive growth and development. The critical elements of youth development programs that should be included in programs include:

- A positive relationship with a caring adult
- Safe physical and emotional environment
- Opportunities to master skills and content
- Opportunities to practice service for others
- Opportunities for self-determination, decision-making and goal setting
- Opportunities to be an active, engaged learner
- A positive connection with the future
- An inclusive atmosphere

"I love learning and 4-H provides plenty of education for me."

The following are key results that illustrate the critical elements included in the study:

1. Caring Adults: Much research points to a caring adult being a strong element in positive youth development. Our survey found strong agreement with both youth and adults that adults in 4-H made young people feel good about themselves.

2. Safe Places: Ninety-four percent of youth and 98% of adults agreed that in 4-H, youth feel safe to try new things. Ninety-three percent of youth agreed that "I feel safe when I do 4-H activities."

3. Learning: This research shows that 4-H is open to new learning. Over 88% of the youth feel that they can try new or different things. Eighty-four percent of youth feel that 4-H can help them solve problems on their own.

4. Service: Ninety-one percent of youth and 98% of adults agreed that adults help youth to work with others as a team. Community service has always been an important component of 4-H with adults and youth working together with community organizations. One youth said, "I learned how to do community work and now I like it."

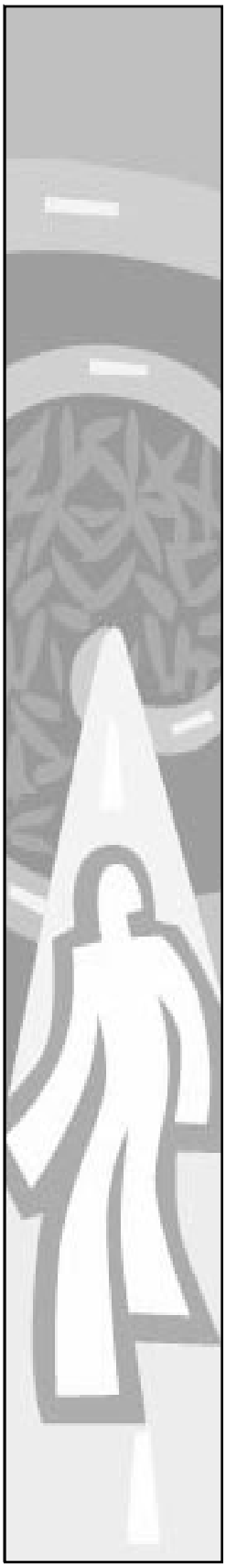
5. Responsibility: Ninety percent of kids surveyed agreed with the statement "4-H teaches me to help other people." Furthermore, they felt that "4-H teaches me to be responsible for my actions."

6. Belonging: Ninety-two percent of both youth and adults agreed with the statement that "All kinds of kids are welcome in 4-H." Ninety percent of kids agreed that "4-H helps me to accept differences in others." Ninety-four percent agreed that gender made no difference in that "both boys and girls can be leaders in 4-H."

"4-H has changed my life by letting me make my own choices."

This report outlines the history and purpose of the National 4-H Impact Assessment Project. Results are included from our nationwide surveys of youth and adults as are results from states replicating or utilizing the study in some way and general recommendations for future work. The overarching purpose of the project (which extends beyond the development of these surveys and data) is to help answer the question, "What positive outcomes in youth result from the presence of critical elements in a 4-H experience?" This project represents the first truly national attempt to address these issues.

Introduction & History



Funding agencies, foundations, government entities, and private partners have charged youth-serving agencies to document the positive impacts of the programs they support. In general, they want to know that these programs are making differences in the lives of young people.

The 4-H Youth Development Program has been in existence since 1902 but has never conducted a national study of impact, despite numerous discussions and recommendations to do so. Although a "matrix of consequences" was constructed to plant the seeds for a national evaluation effort in about 1980 (in response to Congress's directive for Cooperative Extension to demonstrate the consequences of its programs), the suggestions made by evaluation professionals were not implemented (Scriven, 1979, 1980; Meyers, 1980; Pigg, 1980; Patton, 1980; Light, 1980). Part of the difficulty in implementing complex evaluation strategies is the variety of types of programming that occur in the diverse delivery modes of 4-H. Even twenty years ago, it was noted that the "realm of specific outcomes was too immense to be dealt with coherently" (Meyers, 1980). Meyers also noted the reality of the local adaptation issue:

> *"...local program staff are free to adapt general educational programs to local situations, local participants doing so only voluntarily, as they perceive a program's utility and value. In the case of 4-H, this is particularly critical, as many efforts are predicated on high rates of adult participation as volunteer staff. Thus, there is a considerable potential for variability in 4-H programs, not only from state to state, but from community to community within states, as agents modify their practices to juxtapose with local preferences."*

Furthermore, a need for balance between a practical, useful tool and an instrument with rigorous research integrity was apparent. The 4-H Youth Development Program has a long rich history of positive youth development educational activities designed to develop young people into capable, caring, and contributing members of society. Because of this history, many have assumed that everyone knows 4-H and its positive programming efforts. Unfortunately, this is no longer an appropriate assumption. The trend pointed out by Pigg (1980) of "increased demand on Extension and 4-H administrators to improve their program monitoring and evaluation functions..." is more true today than ever.

During a national meeting of State 4-H Program Leaders in April 1997, a discussion took place about the need for a national study of impact. Funding agencies wanted impact data. Other national youth-serving organizations were being funded due to impact data they had generated. The program leaders decided upon the following five evaluation priorities during that meeting:

- *identify areas of current research and establish a network for replication and dissemination;*
- *design and develop original youth development outcomes research;*
- *build the capacity of the Cooperative Extension System related to 4-H Youth Development impact assessment;*
- *identify social and economic outcomes related to 4-H volunteerism; and*
- *develop national leadership and assistance in assessing any Government and Performance Results Act (GPRA) youth development targeted measures;*

In August 1997, under the leadership of staff from the University of Arizona and on behalf of the State 4-H Program Leaders, a request for the funding of a national impact study of the 4-H Youth Development Program was presented to Dr. Alma Hobbs, Director of 4-H/Families/Nutrition at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service. What resulted was a grant of $25,000 received from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and thus the die was cast for a national study. Under the leadership of the University of Arizona and with this initial funding from Dr. Hobbs, the vision was created and action steps taken.

In December 1997, forty-five people from twenty-three different states met in Tucson, Arizona, to discuss and design a National Impact Assessment of the 4-H Youth Development Program. Purpose statements and a study question were drafted, and work groups were formed. The purposes of the project included the following:

- *establish a baseline measure of current 4-H program outcomes and generate defensible data that can be shared with decision-makers at the local, state, and national levels;*
- *foster additional impact initiatives by linking states that wish to collaborate on targeted projects;*
- *encourage every county and state to collect, analyze, and report 4-H impact data; and*

- *build an infrastructure that will make impact assessment an ongoing, continuous part of 4-H Youth Development.*

The intent of pursuing these purposes was to put 4-H in a better position to answer the question, "What positive outcomes in youth result from the presence of critical elements in a 4-H experience?" The work groups formed during the Tucson meeting were as follows: Critical Elements, Outcomes, Methods and Current Efforts *(see Appendix A for a list of members).*

Survey questions were designed based upon critical elements found in the youth development literature and positive outcomes conceptually associated with these elements. The assessment process was designed to focus on youth in grades 4-12 who participate in 4-H delivery modes (clubs, school enrichment, special interest and after-school programs).

States were randomly selected from each of the four geographic regions of the country. Each state then randomly selected counties to participate, and in turn the counties randomly selected the groups to participate. Although the initial goal was to obtain 8,000 youth participant surveys and 800 adult surveys, the numbers of completed and returned surveys were sufficient for statistical analysis and conclusions to be drawn. Counties received evaluation packets that included the survey instruments and instructions on how to make the process interactive and fun. The pre-pilot, pilot and national data collection phases and instruments *(found in Appendix F)* were all approved by the University of Arizona and other relevant Institutional Review Boards (i.e., Human Subjects Committees) and parental permission and youth assent were obtained for all survey data reported here.

Support for this project took many forms; money, faculty/staff time, conference planning assistance, pilot and national survey participation,report printing, strong verbal support and many other ways too numerous to count. This was a million dollar effort of which the entire Cooperative Extension should be extremely proud. The vast majority of states contributed in some way to make this report a reality. *(See Appendix A).*